

CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL: THE SMALL
PORTRAIT CARVINGS OF THE
PULPITUM c. 1400

C.J. DUDLEY

Variously referred to as the Quire Screen, the Choir Screen, and the Screen of the Six Kings, the Canterbury pulpitum stands across the east side of the transept crossing under the central Bell Harry tower, facing westward through the crossing to the nave. As it now stands, scrubbed clean of all its original colour and gilding, devoid of all its heraldry and with much of the statuary destroyed, it is difficult to imagine the screen's early magnificence. Nevertheless, it remains one of the glories of Canterbury and of Christendom.

Such little attention as the screen has received to date has been directed mainly at the six full-length effigies of royal personages ranged across the lower half. The identification of these figures as popularly offered is as follows: (l. to r.) Henry V, Richard II (*sic*), Ethelbert King of Kent, Edward the Confessor, Henry IV, Henry VI.¹ The identification of the Henrys, all Lancastrian Kings, is in accordance with other well-attested portraits. That of the Saxon Kings, based on iconographic evidence, is almost certainly correct, but the identification of the second figure with Richard II is certainly wrong. Comparison with contemporary portraits shows this figure, (which was once supposed, on account of its 'good looks', to be a woman), to be in fact a portrait of Edward IV, who is also portrayed, with his family, in the great window (1465–82) that overlooks the pulpitum kings from the adjoining N.W. transept. (Richard II had a long face with a forked beard, Edward IV had a plump face, was clean-shaven and good-looking, with a 'pretty' mouth.)

¹ C. Cotton, *The Chronicle of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral*, no. 20, April 1935, Canterbury, 12.



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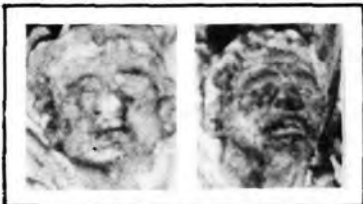


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Portrait Carvings of the Pulpitum.



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Portrait Carvings of the Pulpitum.

The Date of the Screen

Contemporary documents record the architectural fabric of the screen as having been constructed during the priorate of Thomas Chillenden (1390–1411).² There can be little doubt that the fictive effigies of the Saxon kings date from the completion of the original construction, and it will be seen from consideration of the political purpose of the project that the figure of Henry IV must be of similar date. The subsequent emplacement of the statues of Henry V, Henry VI and Edward IV doubtlessly displaced fictive images of earlier monarchs who probably would have been, like Ethelbert and the Confessor, pre-Conquest benefactors of the Church such as Canute and Edgar. As Joan Evans has indicated,³ the purpose of this row of statutory was to demonstrate as publicly as possible and lastingly, the support of the Universal Church to the claims of Henry Bolingroke and the House of Lancaster to be the true heirs to the English throne. The Canterbury screen was the first of a series of similar screens of kings in Old St. Paul's, Wells, Durham, York, and possibly Winchester, that were set up by Henry IV for the sole purpose of 'bringing the English monarchy within the received iconography of the Universal Church' (Evans). The inclusion and special preservation of Ethelbert and the Confessor in the Canterbury scheme suggests that this purpose in relation to the House of Lancaster was to be achieved by relating it to the Christian Saxon kings, and this strategy may be related to Henry IV's wish to be enshrined in the city of Canterbury where Christian Saxon kings had been buried, and to his intention to make Canterbury Cathedral the royal mausoleum for his descendants. (This plan was reversed by his son, Henry V).

In the light of its chronological standing as the first of the royal screens to be erected, and of its political importance in consolidating Bolingbroke's claim to the throne, the date of construction lies in all probability in the early years of Henry's reign (1399–1413). John Harvey, who is of the opinion that the designer of the screen would have been Yevele's successor at Canterbury, Stephen Lote (*fl.* 1381–1417/18),⁴ considers the sculptor of the Lancastrian kings to have been John Massingham III senior, who flourished 1409–1450 and was responsible for the effigies of Henry VI and Archbishop Chichele in All Souls College, Oxford. It was Massingham who

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ J. Evans, *English Art 1307–1461*, Oxford 1949, 86.

⁴ J. Harvey, *English medieval Architects*, London and Boston 1954, 163.

introduced the new continental realism into English sculpture.⁵

In the assessment of Joan Evans the complete series of English royal portrait screens of the early fifteenth century, which have no parallel in France, presents 'a higher standard of accomplishment than any portrait sculpture hitherto achieved in England.'⁶ The royal statuary of Canterbury is not, however, the subject of this study.

The Alabaster Statuary

Twenty-seven feet above the pavement of the Quire entrance and extending across the full breadth of the screen's uppermost border stands a row of statues consisting of eleven allegorical or biblical figures carved in gypsum alabaster, all about 60 cm. in height. They have received little critical attention and they appear to be of unexceptional seventeenth-century English workmanship. Originally twelve in number, (the twelfth now stands in a niche at the entrance to the north choir aisle), these alabaster figures were made in the late seventeenth century to replace statuary on Archbishop Chichele's tomb destroyed in the iconoclasm of 1642.⁷ Two and a half centuries later, in 1896, they were transferred from the Chichele tomb, where they were replaced by the present statuary, to their present situation at the top of the pulpitum in order, themselves, once again to replace the original fifteenth-century statuary also destroyed in 1642.⁸

The Angels

Between the two rows of full-length figures, across the middle height of the screen, extends a row of thirteen busts of angels carrying heraldic shields. They are of considerable quality and interest and are worthy of serious critical attention, but they are not the primary subject of the present study. As William Urry has suggested,⁹ they almost certainly include portraits of young women (perhaps also, one wonders, of young men) of the court of Henry IV. More than one of them appears to bear a strong family resemblance to the figure of Henry V standing below them.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 182-3.

⁶ Evans, *op. cit.*, 87.

⁷ Anon., *The Chronicle of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral*, no. 31, October 1938, Canterbury, 24.

⁸ Cotton, *op. cit.*, 13-4.

⁹ L. Lang-Sims, *Canterbury Cathedral*, London 1979, 47.

The small Portraits

Of far greater interest than either the royal portraits or the alabaster statues are the small portrait heads, originally seventy in number, that bejewel the canopies around the heads of the fifteen full-length figures. They are set out in two rows. The upper group, standing 28 ft. above the pavement, and consisting originally of 22 heads, is arranged in 11 pairs, each pair enhancing the canopy over one of the alabaster figures. The lower group, comprised of 48 heads, arranged in 6 groups of 8, ranges across the 6 canopies encompassing the heads of the 6 kings.

The portraits of the lower set are each about 1½ in. (3.5 cm.) in height, and by reason of their diminutive proportions and high placing mostly very difficult to observe with the naked eye, particularly those that are immersed in deep shadow. Although slightly larger in scale, being about 2 in. (5 cm.) in height, the heads of the upper row are virtually invisible without the use of binoculars. The difference in size between the two groups of heads has, it will be shown, a direct bearing on the iconographic significance of the whole series.

The Restorations

For the purposes of reference each head has here been numbered as follows: Top row, left to right – 1 to 22. Bottom row, left to right – 23 to 70.

A considerable number reveal themselves to be spurious works by nineteenth-century restorers, and most of these are to be found in the top row. They are easily recognisable from their repellent ugliness and the coarseness of their forms, as well as by the joins in the masonry where they have been attached to the original fabric. The restorations are also characterised by a dark skin on the surface of the stone that is peeling away in disfiguring patches, the result no doubt of attempts by the restorers to paint the new work to match the colour of the old stonework.

In the upper row the restorations are nos. 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 21, while in the bottom row nos. 51, 53, and 54 are spurious. The extensiveness of the restorations in the top row indicates the considerable damage to the canopies that must have resulted from Culmer's toppling of 'mitred saints' in 1642, while the close grouping of the small number of restored heads in the lower row suggests a single occasion of accidental damage. Nos. 23 and 24 are also damaged but, perhaps because of their obscure situations in the shadows, remain unrestored. No. 39 has been crudely reworked after damage, and others have suffered varying degrees of minor

degradation.

The screen was restored on at least two recorded occasions, first in 1822 when Thomas Longley restored the royal statues, and again in 1897 when the Chichele tomb figures were transferred to the upper niches of the pulpitum.⁹ The restorations of nos. 53 and 54 are not as coarse nor as unpleasant in character as those of the upper group, and they were probably the work of Longley, whereas the upper restorations are undoubtedly of 1897.

The genuine Portraits

The distinguished quality of the original portrait heads is immediately apparent. Each countenance radiates an inner vitality that transcends the passing of the centuries and brings before us the warm presence of a unique personality. They speak with such immediacy that one seems to hear their voices and observe the movement of their features until they become more real in the imagination than the men and women of today who pass beneath them.

The vivacity and variety of the characterisation leave us in no doubt that these little carvings are all true portraits of real individuals once splendidly alive. There is no hint of mannerism, no breath of caricature, fantasy or grotesquerie, no formalisation, no idealisation; only a deeply sympathetic naturalism, free of all sentimentality, that is unmistakably English, not to say Chaucerian, in quality.

The Technique

Beyond the powerful insight into human personality and a quality of draughtsmanship that demands the word genius, the 70 carvings, taken as a complete project, demonstrate a technical virtuosity that is little short of miraculous. Each head is carved directly into the masonry of the canopy, a process that allows no margin of error or of second thoughts. Although they are carved to a scale that to a layman may seem trivial such a scale demands a degree of skill perhaps even higher than that required for life-size portrait sculpture. It is very probable of course that each head would have been modelled in clay or wax before being carved in stone, and it need hardly be added that, in its original condition each head would have been delicately coloured in a highly naturalistic manner, after receiving a thin whitening coat. It is interesting to note from John Harvey's description of the work of Massingham's son, John Massingham IV junior (*fl.* 1438–1478), that sculptors of high stand-

ing would at this time colour their own works.¹⁰

The Identification of the Portraits

The most intriguing aspect of the whole work lies in the contrast between the characters portrayed in the upper row and those of the lower row. The difference is to be found in the type of person portrayed. The people of the lower range, richly various in character and lively of personality as they are, will seem to be all drawn from a milieu that may best be defined as plebian. Some are elderly, solemn and dignified, but none is noble. Several grouped trios such as nos. 43, 44 and 45, or 35, 36, and 37, project a strong feeling of family relationship, the features of the child in the middle combining the facial characteristics of the mother and father on either side. All evince a quality of lively intelligence and social assurance that marks them out to be able and successful families or individual of high professional standing. There are no yokels, thieves, beggars or charlatans among them, but neither are there any aristocrats.

By contrast, the men and women of the upper screen, such of them as remain, are entirely noble in physiognomy and mien. They are not so much persons as personages. The long visage and square jaw that typified the Norman nobility and its descendants characterise the whole group. The gaze, particularly that of the men, is one of serene leadership. They look not upon the world around them but above it at visions of destiny and honour with a sense of divine guidance that sets them, in their own eyes at least, as beings halfway between men and gods, as their exalted placing would affirm.

It is most unlikely that we shall ever identify individually the people of the lower row. Most probably they were members of families concerned with the organisation of the royal household at the court of Henry IV. J.L. Kirby, the recent biographer of Henry IV,¹¹ identifies many such individuals and one is sorely tempted to speculate as to their identification with the people portrayed here in stone: Sir Thomas Erpyngham (the king's Chamberlain), Sir Hugh Waterton (old friend of the king), Piers Bukton (the king's Standard-bearer and old friend), Thomas More (Treasurer of the Household), Nicholas Bubwith (the king's Secretary), John Searle (Chancellor), Robert Mascall (the king's Confessor), Sir Thomas

¹⁰ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 183.

¹¹ J.L. Kirby, *Henry IV of England*, London 1970.

Brownflete (Controller), Henry Bowet (the king's Attorney), and many others.

The noble personages of the upper screen may, on the other hand, offer some possibility of identification, however speculative, in the light of the artist's precise delineation of age, personality and family resemblance, bearing in mind the likelihood that they were all related by birth or marriage to Henry Bolingbroke and were alive and in good odour when he came to the throne, when no doubt the iconographic scheme of the screen was being formulated. Nos. 3 and 4, for instance, must surely be father and son, and one is led to thoughts of the 40-year-old Henry Percy (Hotspur) and his 16-year-old son, who were still in good odour and loyal supporters of the King. Nos. 19 and 20 are undoubtedly brothers. The princely demeanour of some of the men suggests they may be sons of the king, and this leads one to speculate that we may be beholding true portraits of Prince Henry, Prince Thomas, Prince John or Prince Humphrey. Similarly, the younger women could include the king's daughters Blanche and Philippa. Other royalty that come to mind include the king's half-brothers John Beaufort, Earl of Somerset, and Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester (no. 18?); of women – Queen Joan of Navarre, Queen Isabel of France (Richard's Queen), and Elizabeth the king's sister, with her husband Sir John Corneville. The older couple, nos. 5 and 6 appear to be portrayed with their eyes closed, which may be a trick of the light, but it suggests they may be posthumous portraits, whereupon the king's father John of Gaunt (*d.* 1399) and his third wife Kathryn Swynford (*d.* 1403) enter the field of speculation. Perhaps one needs to be forgiven such imaginings, but nearly all of this group are wearing royal diadems, and the exception, no. 18, wearing religious habit, bears an obvious resemblance to the tomb portrait of Cardinal Henry Beaufort in Winchester Cathedral.

The Photography

Apart from a small reproduction in Lois Lang-Sims recent study of the Cathedral,¹² no photographs of the small portraits appear hitherto to have been published. Anyone attempting to make a photographic record of the complete set of 70 heads will quickly appreciate why this should be the case. No larger than walnuts, immersed in deepest gloom and set 28 ft. above the top of a flight of steps, the upper row in particular presents formidable problems to

¹² Lang-Sims, *op. cit.*, 47.

the photographer. The use of scaffolding is out of the question in this busy area, although on one occasion it was possible to make use of concert staging at some distance from the screen. One cannot pretend to have surmounted the technical difficulties to any degree of satisfaction nor to have done justice to the quality and importance of this remarkable work. Nevertheless, if what has now been accomplished can draw some attention to their existence and importance it may perhaps eventually be possible for a more adequate record to be made.

The intention was to record the carvings as far as possible in the natural light of the cathedral and to avoid wherever possible the use of flashlight which destroys the quality of the modelling and distorts the facial expression. In the case of some heads in the deepest shadow, it did however become necessary to make use of torchlight which resulted in some loss of characterisation. I have photographed all the carved portraits, but for reasons of space it has been possible to reproduce only a small number on this present occasion.